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## Mediating the Promised Gameland

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### Abstract

This paper reflects on the mediation of Japan as gameland for non-Japanese travelers, from a transmedial perspective. It uses a hybrid explorative method, including the analysis of a series of travel video guides, social media commentary, qualitative interviews with game travelers, and autoethnographic field notes. The research takes a starting point in the field, where the human action (of travelling or desiring to travel) is situated, and theorizes *a posteriori*, drawing from the theoretical fields of tourism studies, Japanese studies, and game studies. The writing of the paper wants to illustrate this process by including vignettes from the empirical data collection, so that they can enter a dialogue with the academic voice. The paper is based on the Keynote of the same name, that the author presented at *The Replaying Japan 2020 Conference*, organized by Liege Game Lab.

### Introduction

This expedition started three years ago at a tiny cemetery in Itabashi, where a couple of graves and a memorial stone pay homage to the Shinsengumi samurai and mark the execution site of their leader. I had just conducted an interview nearby with a fan of the game franchise *Hakuoki* and she had mentioned the place, so I decided to pay it a visit. As I looked at the inscriptions, I could not help overhearing the conversation of two young Mexican women behind me. They were wondering if Kondou Isami's head or body could possibly be buried here or if the grave was empty. Then they went on to discussing his leadership qualities, his mistresses and what he would think if he knew that he had been eclipsed by Hijikata in all anime and videogames. We got talking, and ended up going for an ice coffee to discuss locations related to beloved anime and games that they had planned to visit in their holiday.

I had been interviewing Otome players in Tokyo for a couple of weeks by then. Previously, I had been playing games, listening to music and drama CDs, watching anime, buying manga and doujinshi, looking at merchandise and visiting fan home collections of all these things. However, before coming to this gravesite, I had not really considered that real places in the world (beyond commercial areas like Ikebukuro) could also be part of the transmedial ecology of Otome gaming. This is certainly odd, for I know that people enjoy visiting locations from their favourite books, films or

games, and have done so myself. However, it was not until I heard the passion in the voices of the two game tourists that I came to realize how meaningful it was to experience such a site, precisely because of its connection to the rest of the transmedial ecology of products. I also noticed then that for foreigners like us, the attraction of game sites had another dimension that my Japanese interviewees understandably had not mentioned as anything special: the fact that they were in Japan.

After that, I went on to visit many other "game sites" on and off during these three years. I also collected tourist guide books and watched amateur video guides that connected real world places to transmedial universes. I came to see place as a medium where transmedial meaning-making occurs. How does this happen? What kind of experiences do places afford? What are game tourists looking for? How does Japan become a place of pilgrimage for foreign game enthusiasts?

### A Note on Method

The work I present here is part of my ongoing project to map the different dimensions of experiencing transmedial worlds, which I have worked on and off on ever since Lisbeth Klastrup and I published our first paper on transmedial worlds in 2004 (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004). As such, it would be disingenuous to claim a fresh start for this particular investigation, since I have both been producing transmedial theory and close readings of different transmedial products for a long time. However, because of



my Itabashi encounter, I did want the spatial dimension of the transmedial experience to take its starting point in the field, in empirical work, instead of on *a priori* theorizing. So even though I cannot claim to be doing grounded theory, I have as far as possible tried to take a step back and produce less-prejudiced data, maintaining an explorative attitude. I made an effort of focusing on the actual experience: what does this mean (for me and for others)? what affect is produced and what are the desires and motivations at play? I avoided theoretical concepts in my note taking, as well as any premature typologizing.

Moreover, in order to transcend the limits of the ethnography and autoethnography that I had carried out in such a small and non-systematic scope, I decided to also incorporate other methods: specific interviews with game tourists and an analysis of videoguides, both made during the first half of 2020.

To prepare for the new interviews, I took a starting point in the commentary about places already collected when doing interviews for my Otome project<sup>1</sup>. I used it to inspire an interview guide specifically targeted towards game tourism. I recruited voluntary interview subjects in different Japan-interest social media fora<sup>2</sup>, and interviewed 12 people individually about their tourist game experiences<sup>3</sup>.

The third method consisted of selecting a number of YouTube video guides about Japan as gameland, or specific game locations, and analyzing both their composition and their commentary. I initially intended to use these guides as a discussion object with my interviewees, but they were not very interested, so the guides became a self-contained analysis object. This was also a way to incorporate a wider demographic than the people I have directly located, since the commentary to these videos is done by people in different countries and life situations.

The heterogeneous materials collected through these three approaches (field notes, interview transcriptions,

video descriptions with commentary) form the basis of my data, which was gathered and analyzed as a unit. I applied open coding techniques such as situational maps, in successive iterations. Two main topics emerged, which I named “the promised land” and “the tourist”. I will be in this paper showcasing some direct quotes<sup>4</sup> selected because they illustrate the different analysis points.

The last methodical reflection refers to my own position as both a researcher and a game tourist. I was very aware of my non-detached attitude as I became emotional during my visits to the different sites. I made a point of registering this affect in my field notes, as well as of contrasting it to others’. On the one hand, this is a classic ethnographic problem of the emic versus the etic, which in media studies is often framed as “the aca fan problem” (see for example Hills, 2002: 1-20; Jenkins, 2011). The usual concerns apply, including a willingness to be honest about the stickiness of our own entanglements and to reflect on them throughout. On the other, the question of tourism has a stigma attached to it, amply documented in tourism literature (see for instance McCannell 1976, 10). No one wants to be a tourist, because it is perceived as superficial and exploitative; instead, everybody wants to be a traveler. I certainly hoped I was, as the only foreigner trekking to obscure temples and alleyways. This is both naive and embarrassing, but I registered in my interviews that it is such a generalized dimension of the transmedial tourism experience, that I want to make it visible here<sup>5</sup>.

## Theoretical Framing: Mediated Tourism and Transmedia

Even though the transmedial approach to studying mediated places remains unexamined, there is a lot of related research across several fields which I cannot hope to summarize here. I will nonetheless attempt to highlight a few questions that illuminate my own findings and can demonstrate that a transmedial perspective can contribute

<sup>1</sup> This project has been intermittently running since 2017.

<sup>2</sup> I distributed a call for interview subjects in two private Facebook groups and a mailing list.

<sup>3</sup> The interview subjects were selected to attain gender balance and diverse age distribution: six from Denmark (male 20s, male 30s, male 40s, female 20s, female 20s, female 30s), four from Spain (female 40s, male 30s, male 40s, male 50s), and two from France (female 30s, male 20s). The online interviews took an hour in average (approx.) the shortest being 36 minutes and the longest 87 minutes.

<sup>4</sup> All quotes are anonymous and translated by me. Anonymity was a precondition for the interviews. The people I chatted with in fieldsites often didn’t give me their names. As for the video commentary, I have omitted the user names of the commenters, even though they can be located through a simple search since the text is in the open domain.

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, this realization became an antidote to an inborn mistrust of tourists, which I tend to think of as rude parasites because of my dealings with them as a native from a very intensely visited country. Acknowledging that I am also, when in Japan, a tourist, has given me some empathy to counterbalance my initial prejudice, to be able to relate to my research subjects with respect.

with new insights on the symbolic confluences of real and imaginary spaces.

Tourism studies extensively deals with the subjectivity of both ethnography and tourism, building upon Bruner's legacy (Leite et.al, 2019) in ways that can help contextualize this investigation. In Bruner's perspective, the transformation of the self is the ultimate goal of the Western tourist, as the visited places become a fantasy fulfilling an essentially egoistical project (Bruner, 1991). His examination of tourist brochures to find out what is promised, what will be "remembered for a lifetime" has inspired me to interrogate the YouTube videoguides in the same way. Likewise, his observation that an ever improving tourist infrastructure makes the "authentic experience" even harder to find, is a tension in place in many of my interviews, with gamers mentioning active avoidance of the "trodden path".

The idea of the transformation of the self is considered more positively by Harrison (2019) whose attention to the ways in which affect connects places to personal stories (2019: 84) shines through my data. Places are interpreted and lived meaningfully in relation to the personal stories of the tourists, precisely because they have been previously meaningfully mediated. I am in this perspective of course also influenced by Urry and his idea of the tourist gaze as "constructed through mobile images and representational technologies" (2011: 15). There is, in this perspective, no completely innocent (unmediated) gaze, as Couldry & McCarthy (2004) have also eloquently demonstrated.

In a historical perspective, pilgrimage was the first form of travel, aimed towards the spiritual but also heavily marketized, even in the middle ages. Later, the narrative of the Grand Tour emerges, as travelling becomes a way to widen the individual's perspective and realize themselves. These ancient currents have also inspired media researchers. Couldry has for instance proposed the notion of "media pilgrimage" (2007), and Beeton, in her study of film-induced tourism, shows how film provides meaningful markers to places for those who can decipher them. Her approach also fits transmedial tourism involving games:

"Film-induced tourism has strong overtones of pilgrimage, with the tourist travelling (trekking) to sites considered sacred through their connection with fame and notions of fantasy. Film tourists collect memorabilia of places, actors and characters, taking them home along with

stories of fame that raise them up in the view of their peers. The intimate reaction of visitors to many sites can be highly emotionally charged, verging on the spiritual and mystical". (Beeton, 2006: 44). Her work reveals a community dimension that was very prominent in my own material.

There has also been some work specifically about videogames, dealing with the kinds of activities which videogames tourists prefer (Okamoto, 2015) or their motivations (Dubois & Gibbs, 2018). They will be useful later, when discussing the game tourist.

In a specific Japanese context, the concept of *content tourism* has been proposed (Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Seaton et.al., 2017) to refer to the purposeful visiting of sites from anime, manga or games. Most of this work deals with Japanese tourists, but some of the issues are also applicable to the Western audiences I have engaged with.

Often, this research has a cultural industries perspective, related to the "soft power" of Japan and the "cool Japan" strategy (Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Okamoto, 2014). However, commercial strategies are put in connection to a sort of new spirituality, where people establish alternative relationships and search for liminal spaces, like in Sugawa-Shimada's study on *rekijo* (2015) or Yamamura and Okamoto's use of the terms "sacred sites" and *seichi junrei* (Okamoto, 2015). Complicated questions of national identity arise in different ways, for what is essentially Japanese? This is not my focus here at all, but still, it is worth mentioning that for Japanese tourists "an idealized and imagined 'Japanese identity' and 'Japaneseness'", disconnected from actual history and ideology, arises (Sugawa-Shimada, 2015). For the Western tourists I have talked to, this imagined country is even farther away from real history, but no less attractive.

On a related note, both Rachael Hutchinson and Susan Napier mention travelling to iconic places as part of fan practises related to Japanese media culture. Both researchers are preoccupied with the nature of the imaginaries that are collectively constructed during these activities, as exemplified by the idea of fantasyscape (Napier, 2007) or Japan as a playable object (Hutchinson, 2019).<sup>6</sup>

The second overarching theoretical field I am building upon is the work on transmediality which I have done over the years with Lisbeth Klasturp (Tosca & Klasturp, 2019). We have had an experiential approach to the study of

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<sup>6</sup> Games codifying Japan as a playable object can be explicit or also try to mask it, as Navarro Remesal & Pérez Zapata note (2020).

transmedial worlds, investigating the different ways in which regular people integrate transmedial universes in their lives. Even our definition of transmedial worlds is reception-centric, and not franchise or platform oriented, as we define a transmedial world as “an abstract content system from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms” (Kastrup & Tosca, 2004). That is, we are interested in the collective establishing of a core *worldness*, that is recognizable and enjoyable no matter the form it takes. In our perspective, fan imaginings and creations are as important as the officially launched products. We propose three aspects that can be used to describe a given world, the *ethos*, *topos* and *mythos*, that then get actualized across different media products. An example could be *Lord of the Rings* as a series of books, films, comics, roleplaying games, computer games, and more, where each individual product is part of a network of meanings that all relate to the same core. If a new film fails to comply to the general idea of worldness, for example by presenting evil elves that burn trees, we would consider that it fails in conveying the worldness of LOTRO. Of course this consensus changes with time and a number of parodic modes are possible.

Games have been an important part of our close readings and empirical analyses. In particular, the experience of playing has been often highlighted by our research subjects as a meaningful inhabiting of the transmedial universes. We have found that because transmedial experiences are usually linked to strong processes of self-understanding, people develop nostalgic feelings that motivate them to keep coming back to certain universes. This transmedial approach can contribute with a new angle to the mediated tourism experiences introduced above in relation to film and games, since the natural status of a transmedial fan is perpetual nostalgia, as they seek to fulfill a series of desires through experiencing, transforming and inhabiting transmedial worlds (Tosca, 2015). Real places are part of the transmedia ecology, not just as a way for some games to get their *topos* anchored in reality, but as independent signifiers and communication channels in themselves. The three transmedial desires framework help us see how this happens.

The first desire, that of experiencing more is the simplest one when we encounter a transmedial world we like: to seek out as many instantiations as possible. Some of those can be places that refer to the world, reproduce it or for example sell merchandise. This desire is cumulative, and self-serving, the more we find, the more meaning and

weight the world acquires in our imagination, and the more we seek it. A typical example could be a shop or a museum thematized after a particular transmedial Universe.

The second desire is about transforming. People want to produce content themselves within the transmedial world they like. This includes very elaborate productions, like fan fictions or machinima, or very simple, like a meme. Often, transformations are transgressive, like in the classic example of slash fiction changing the sexual orientation of protagonists. Or even when people stream their gameplay combining it with fun commentary. Place can again be a medium in relation to this desire in various ways, including the travel guides I have looked at for this research. For example, a host can walk around a real world location while filming themselves and explaining how it overlaps with game locations.

The third desire is that of inhabiting, and it involves us going into the transmedial world, not just to contemplate it, but also setting up a scenography that can be lived in. Gameplay is a very clear way to fulfill this desire, but also cosplay, which can also be combined with a visit to a real life setting. Several forms for game tourism can fit this category, which is closely related to what Napier calls the *fantasyscape*, a constructed virtual reality (like a theme park) that plays out as a temporary liminal world (Napier, 2007: 11).

These three desires illustrate different ways in which place is symbolically produced in relation to transmedial worlds, and thus connect this project to the budding field of the geography of communication, as defined by Falkheimer and Jansson in their edited collection (2006). They note that “within the production of space, transmission and ritual are always interwoven – as are material, symbolic and imaginative processes” (15). Interestingly, these processes can unfold in the physical world, but also for example in social media, where reading fanfic, sharing a meme or roleplaying in Discord can certainly be a way of experiencing more, transforming and inhabiting transmedial worlds. In our framework, we propose to look at these activities as networked reception practices (Tosca & Kastrup, 2019), where games become part of multi-platform networks of meaning and affect.

## The Promised Land

I begin the analysis by interrogating the idea of the promised land as presented in the videos, since it was a starting point also for the reflection in my interviews, an

easy way to break the ice and start a conversation about Japan as gameland.

I mainly found two kinds of videos when browsing YouTube<sup>7</sup>, the ones I call “Bucket List” videos (for example, “5 Awesome things Every Gamer Needs to do in Tokyo”) and the ones I called “Evidence” videos (like “Kamurocho vs Kabukicho revisited”). There are two very distinct kinds of mediation at play, so much so that I would say they are different genres altogether.

The Bucket List videos are normative, with enthusiastic, earnest guides that present themselves as experts sharing their insider knowledge. Most show the same handful of places (Akihabara with various shops or arcades like Super Potato, Nakano Broadway, Ikebukuro...). Although they insist on addressing the viewer as a fellow *otaku*, the information is very basic and the rhetorics, bombastic, like here: “you can finally indulge your fanaticism”, “every gamer will feel a connection to this”. The editing is quick, with overwhelming aesthetics of light, movement, busy places and (often) loud music. Gameland Japan becomes a loud spectacle of consumerism and a zoo where you can see the geeks out of their cages.

The comments to the videos are usually short expressions of an intense desire to visit Japan, such as “oh man, you really make me want to go”, “that is soooo cool” or saying how whatever the video depicts could happen “only in Japan”, delighting in otherness and exoticism. My interviewees admitted that they enjoyed visiting these places, but distanced themselves from the videos, saying they did not offer any new information and the (geek) othering made them uncomfortable. As an illustration, here is a quote from the interviews:

“The recommendations are not the problem. I mean, I go to Akihabara every time, like to play retro games and buy lots of stuff. But the guides are superficial. You cannot preach this shit, you need to have lived it. Because of videos like this you get all these American families prancing around Akihabara mouth agape, and you know they are going to mishandle the owls”.

This fragment is revealing of the critical stance adopted by my interviewees. The Bucket List videos are in their view superficial. The concepts from tourism literature introduced above come in handy here in relation to themes like appropriation, authenticity and tourist identity. The videos are inviting others, who are unworthy, into their sacred territory. The gameland becomes an empty spectacle which is embarrassing to be a part of. The presence of these “fake fans” bothers them. They are loud, they are clueless, they are too visible, ruining the idea of an authentic space. My interviewees still come to Akihabara, maybe to buy a specific game or merchandise, but they refuse to take part in experiences that have become “too touristy” such as maid cafes. From a transmedial world perspective, these consumption sites are a useful source of material objects, but not a stimulus for the imagination.

On the other hand, the second category of videos, the “Evidence” videos connecting games to the real world, are tapping into another discourse. The expert guides are much less intense, they have quiet voices and allow for a lot of silence, letting the atmosphere of places seep through. Some of the videos are just videofootage comparing the real and the virtual places, with the authors erasing themselves from the picture. The videos prove that the worldness of these games is anchored in reality, which makes their transmedial appeal stronger.

Commentary to these videos is mostly by other players of the game, thanking the makers for their efforts and expressing their own feelings of wonder at seeing the game “in real life”. For some (like the person who wrote “holy shit! *Don Quixote* is an actual shop!”), the real world connection comes as a surprise, but most state that this extra mediation helps make their gameplay more meaningful. This time, the video comments and my interviewees are very much in sync. They had also done things like this *Persona 5* fan:

“I dragged my sister to the laundromat and was all jumping around and saying I wished we could wash a load and something magical would happen and she was pissed

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<sup>7</sup> I did searches on variations of expressions like “Japan gamer guide”, “otaku guide”, “places Japan game”, as well as specific game titles and locations, like “Persona 5 places”. In English, Spanish, French and Danish. I found most of the videos this way, and sometimes also followed the links suggested by the algorithm, which then located other highly-voted videos. Here is a sample of some of the videos I analyzed: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgh\\_dZIMfLo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgh_dZIMfLo)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPRzmc8Ln\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPRzmc8Ln_0)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVfleafSafc>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9X1kNTxJxg>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROHmElw5cok>  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=567KVc7kD\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=567KVc7kD_E)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcDh8W6Hwk8>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nftXCH9KlIE>  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_m8KfkQGxs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_m8KfkQGxs)

because of the long trek in the heat and was all: “for God’s sake, it is just a bunch of rusty washing machines!”

They express how exciting it is to have the opportunity to inhabit this space with their own bodies, to fancy themselves protagonists, to be able to climb, hide or jump at certain locations. They enjoy how spaces overlap and compress, how you can go to Shibuya station after having played *Persona 5* and find the Ginza line without getting lost (and also how knowing the real Shibuya station can help to play the game), or about how certain Kamurocho streets (a fictive location in the *Yakuza* games, modelled upon Kabukicho) are shortened, so that it doesn’t take as much time to walk through it in *Yakuza* as it does in real life.

These videos tap on a sense of authenticity that is the opposite of the Bucket List category. They are anti-spectacle. The makers and audiences of Evidence videos share their delight in mundane places that suddenly afford aesthetic experiences, in a sort of situational aesthetic experience (Saito, 2010) fuelled by the transmedial world. Here, there is no shame in participating, since the identity marker is not that of tourist, but of traveler, partaking of something that only the initiated know about.

However, the Western traveler’s relation to Japan as gameland is not as black and white (tourist versus traveler) as the discussion about the two kinds of videos suggests. There are more nuanced issues that emerge in the analysis in relation to how Japan is constituted as a transmedial universe in itself.

It became prominent in the analysis that my interviewees consider that typical Japanese game mechanics have a correspondence with certain material practices in Japan. For instance, a woman explained: “I buy a lot of gacha. Finding luck in random objects in colourful packages is a key mechanics”. She further elaborated on how she feels that she is playing a game whenever she uses money on gacha machines, participating in some sort of ritual. Moreover, the correspondence goes both ways, because the physical gacha machines also evoke all the many times in which “luck” mechanisms have appeared in her gameplay. The other interviewees offered similar observations about different Japanese artefacts and practices, regardless of their actual history or intent.

This kind of weaving of games, personal history and on-location experiences happens not only in relation to objects or places, but also in relation to social realities, that the interviewees perceive as codified (or simulated) in games. For instance, another interviewee, who played a lot

of Otome games and was familiar with Japanese dating customs as part of the games’ universe, told me how she experienced the same pattern in reality:

“I was an exchange student and went on some dates. So the guy took me to all these places you date in games: an aquarium, an amusement park, and we went to a festival too. It was hilarious, but also sweet. There was clearly a structure to it and it felt familiar. I knew what to do.”

In both examples, with the gacha and the dates, Japanese culture becomes a playable object, in a slightly different form than the suggested by Hutchinson. In her analysis of *Katamari Damacy*, she concludes that Japanese games showcase cultural artefacts, “packaging contemporary Japan for consumption” (2019: 43). Here however, the artefacts or social habits are not marketized by game producers, but personally chosen by gamers as representative of their own gameplay history. The ability to produce these connections makes gamer tourists into travelers, those who can read the hidden patterns behind what is on plain sight, decoding, as it were, a procedural (Bogost, 2007) dimension of reality.

Japan as gameland becomes thus also a transmedial universe of its own, beyond the commodified locations presented in the video guides. It has a distinct mythos, topos and ethos, a worldness that the gamer travelers can immerse themselves into. My interviewees enjoyed detailing exactly which aspects of visiting Japan constituted this transmedial universe for them. For some, it is a mostly contemplative experience that does not differ very much from that of any other tourist seeking to absorb the essence of a place:

“I am a *flâneur*. I walk and walk and walk in cities, but also in nature. It has to be random. I love to uncover the map, to explore super narrow street passages or find a random temple. I feel the earth under my feet and the smells and the oppressive heat”.

However, for most of the people I talked with, there was also an interest in attaining a deeper level of understanding of Japanese people and their way of life. This is often explained in terms of cultural literacy:

“I have done some home stays, where I get to know regular people. I talk to grandmas, housewives, and high school kids. I hang in bars with the salarymen and eat ramen. I watch TV too! I know it doesn’t sound so videogamish, but I think now I understand things that pop up often in games like the peer pressure, the *tatemaie* or the hidden rage. So I think: you know, the games couldn’t have been made anywhere else”.

These travelers are mostly admiring but not uncritical, for example lamenting gender discrimination in Japanese society. They are specially careful when the conversation leads to the “Japaneseness” issue. There is silence and hesitation in the interview transcriptions, as words can be (mis)interpreted as objectifying the other culture. What is Japanese? They name mundane things that definitely do not get branded in cool Japan strategies (the drink vending machines, the sound of using the Suica card on the metro...). They recount very material, situated experiences; not from a position of disembodied aesthetic appreciation, but from a deep involvement with their own selves and their life stories. Sometimes, the mundane can trigger nearly sublime experiences, which the interviewees admit to like confessions, often punctuated by a disclaimer or a nervous laughter, like this:

“All my life I have been looking for the place which I first glimpsed in *Blade Runner*, and it sometimes appears when I am walking around in Japan...”

Here, the person becomes aware of the connection of the real world with the imaginary spaces they dream about. This connection is fragile, it can appear and disappear, but when people feel it, they are not in doubt. Unlike Napier's fantasyscape, which was purposefully constructed, this liminal place is difficult to grasp. It cannot be “visited” as such, but only noticed, dreamt of, made as we walk along and suddenly are taken over by the power of our own imagining. The above was not an isolated quotation, since several interviewees suggest that the reason they keep returning to Japan is that it lets them see something that they otherwise do not see:

“Japanese cities are like icebergs, you see the street in the surface, and then there are like seven levels above, in all the small shops in the buildings, and seven levels below your feet. I feel like I am looking at the future, when we run out of place on earth, or colonize another planet without a friendly atmosphere.”

I would go so far as to call these moments, epiphanies, which the travelers seek. When I ask for clarification, they admit that it is due to something inside them, that is, it could happen anywhere, but for some reason, it happens *more* in Japan. Sometimes, in real world Japan, sometimes in the games.

## The Tourist

As I hope is already evident, there is a lot of soul searching in the game tourist endeavour, so in this section

I focus on the subjective aspects of game tourism. There is a small body of literature covering aspects like the degree of dedication or the kinds of things that people like to do. In their article on video-game induced tourism, Dubois & Gibbs identify three categories of tourist according to how invested people are: the serendipitous, the general and the specific. While the first two categories are more casual, the third covers the people who “are the most driven; self-actualization, pilgrimage, self-identity fantasy and romance are all powerful motivations to travel” (Dubois & Gibbs, 2018). This third category would probably cover all of my interviewees, since having purposefully visited game sites was a premise for self-selection when I was recruiting them. However, on the field sites, I met also with more casual tourists, people “passing by” or following a guide book without a lot of personal investment in the site itself. I also observed that there is a social dimension to game tourism. For instance, a “specific” tourist takes a couple of “serendipitous” friends along for a visit. For the latter, the visit was a curiosity, a pleasant way to spend time, but nothing tugged the strings of their hearts. Serendipitous visitors are not “converted” by visiting a place, that is, the game connection needs to have been established before if they are to be moved by the visit.

As for the things which game tourists like to do on site, Okamoto, in his paper about “otaku tourism” names six favourite activities: Photos, Offerings, SoMe posting, Merch acquisition, Cosplay, Interaction with locals (Okamoto, 2015). This is very much in sync with my own observations and conversations, and is actually valid for all kinds of tourists. For the very invested, the pictures and merchandise become valuable tokens, while for the casual visitors, it is a way to make sure that their visit becomes more meaningful.

Both Dubois & Gibbs and Okamoto's articles are about motivation and external interactions. However, another perspective becomes visible in relation to transmedial worlds: a view inward, where game tourism is related to an understanding of the self, in line with the literature reviewed above. Overwhelmingly so, the game tourists I talked to see themselves as special, as travelers. Their transmedial literacy gives them knowledge that regular tourists do not possess. This is not only an elitist attempt to differentiate themselves from the unknowing masses, but has a positive social side, where the game traveler finds a community of others who also are in the know. These others are seldom found in the sites themselves, but mostly on the Internet, where game travelers share their experience



or plan their trips. Both the pre-visit preparations and the storytelling afterwards are heavily mediated in the case of transmedial tourism.

This view inwards, fuelled by transmedial imagery, can help understand the category of the “specific” or very motivated tourist that the literature describes. The game tourists I talked to are certainly very invested in the deep meaning that the visit to Japan has for them, because it is deeply connected to their own life story. As one of the people I talked to put it:

“Here (in Denmark) I am different inside, although I am the same as the others outside. In Akihabara, I am different outside but feel an inside connection. So it somehow makes me feel that it is ok to be different, and not to fit anywhere, really”.

For my interviewees, the game sites are a medium that affords defamiliarization, a way to see themselves from the outside and thus attain some understanding. In the transmedial experience framework, this is the process where fantasy, life and place are woven together in unpredictable ways, like the young man who told me about his childhood love of Pokémon, how the story of Tajiri Satoshi inspired him to travel in Japan, collecting things and trying to understand... in a very long, complex tale that ended with the sentence “and that is why I became a school teacher”. This conclusion surprised me, because the connection was not that obvious to me, but he deeply believed in it, so that the transmedial universe of Pokémon had become vital to his understanding of his own biography.

### **Corona Disruption: from Games to Japan and Back**

An interruption of the argument is necessary here, because it radically changed the way I understood the connection of real and imaginary (transmedial) places.

While I was interviewing people (online) for this project in the first half of 2020, a pandemic lockdown due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus was in place in most of the world. As the isolation weeks passed, feelings of claustrophobia and despair made their way into the interviews. People locked up at home, all around the world, were using games to regain a sense of freedom, and so I began asking about this too in the interviews, since it was relevant to the question of desiring to visit other places. This opened up a flood of emotional reactions. My interviewees missed Japan, and even though they might not have been planning an immediate trip, the sudden

impossibility of going was nagging them. It turned out that nearly all of us were playing or re-playing games that allowed us to virtually travel to Japan. Some of my interviewees admitted to having done this before, but it had intensified in lockdown times. Some were doing mundane things like going to the bathhouse or riding the train back and forth in *Persona 5*. Others were petting foxes and looking for Inari Shrines in *The Ghost of Tsushima*. I was playing through the *Yakuza* series, neglecting the main story in order to walk around picking up pocket tissues, enter *kombinis* or hang out in seedy joints.

In the interviews, we talked about the sense of healing we got from “travelling” like this. Our connection to Japan was reactivated as a transmedial universe of its own, to play with, to win at, when real life felt like we were losing.

This reflection added another dimension to my project. I had started interrogating how and why people visit Japan because of games. Now, the question became also how and why people visit games because of Japan. Mediation goes thus in both directions, as the virtual universe acquires extra meaning because of the real Japan and vice versa. So is the promised gameland virtual or real?

The answer is: both.

### **Conclusion: a Thicker Worldness**

This paper has explored the mediation of Japan as gameland for non-Japanese travelers, from a transmedial perspective, highlighting how place, self and transmedial imagination are entangled in tight-knitted tapestries and showing that place is also a communicative medium.

Both Napier and Hutchinson have stressed the liminal nature of the conflation of physical and imaginary spaces, Napier in her fantasyscape, with Disneyland as the prototypical example, and Hutchinson writing that games are “portals into a world of virtual travel”. While I really appreciate these passageway metaphors and their magical vibe, a portal is about separate worlds. And the realization that has emerged in the course of this investigation is the near opposite.

My conclusion is that the mediated gameland is a heavy, composite place, where several worlds are present *at the same time*. Like in the *tasogaredoki* scene at the end of the film *Your Name*, where Taki and Mitsuha, who have been inhabiting each other’s bodies, finally meet in a magic twilight. Their two separate worlds are then superimposed and can touch each other. The gameland is like the *tasogaredoki*: there is the world of the game, the real world

site, and also the world of the imagination of each player, with their own biography and quirky entanglements. It is a place heavy with meaning, a place of a thick worldness providing a sense of transcendence that is about connecting. You can be in the real world and experience it as richer, because you carry the transmedial meanings with you, and you can be in a game and experience it as richer, because you carry your experience of the real world with you. You can invoke this place on purpose, through traveling or firing up a game, but it can also assault you by surprise.

Further theoretical work on this topic would need to situate these transmedial thick places in relation to the literature on the meanings of space and place; for instance the work of Lefebvre, de Certeau, Augé and others. Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between an embodied place, “a concentration of value, though not a valued thing that can be handled or carried about easily; it is an object in which one can dwell”. (1977: 12), and a mythical one, with an imaginary dimension. It would be productive to build upon these categories, also inspired by Ek, who notes that “space (and place) is always in a process of becoming” (2006: 49).

My modest beginning here so far has been to map how we produce transmedial places in acts of mediation (looking at them through our “game eyes”), and how acts of mediation (games, videos, guides) in turn affect our real world experiences of places. Bodies and imaginaries are thus indelibly linked. I would therefore like to end with a quote from the anthropologist François Bouchetoux, noting how places cannot be separated from consciousness:

“Places make us who we are. They seemingly only provide a backdrop for our identities, but in reality produce these identities. They encompass a wealth of information that we connect to our mental images, to past places, utopias, déjà-vus and emotional outburst that can never be eloquently expressed” (2014: 10). Transmedial places are also like this, made of a mix of real and imagined experiences. Attempting to disentangle them from each other would be impossible, I venture. But you can certainly try, it might be an illuminating process to reflect about your favourite gamelands. Soon, the traveling ban will be lifted and we will all be able to return to Japan.

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